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SUBJECT: MUTHANNA: THE ISSUES, THE LEADERS, POSSIBLE STEPS
AHEAD

Classified By: Classified by Robert Gilchrist, Political Counselor, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: Muthanna is beset by militia intimidation -- notably by the Jash al Mahdi (JAM) -- power shortages, and poor economic performance. That said, the province is currently stable, relatively secure, and has a reasonably effective provincial government. MNF-I efforts could be effective in helping improve the provincial government's capacity, particularly in reducing unemployment, stimulating the private sector, and developing the local economy. This is one of a series of analyses by Provincial Reconstruction Teams analyzing each governate of Iraq. End summary.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY ISSUES

¶2. (S/REL MNF-I) The key issues in Muthanna are the militias) principally Jaysh al-Mahdi) the police, unemployment, agriculture, essential services, and the State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) is the dominant militia force in Muthanna. Since May 2006 when Muthanna went to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC), JAM has punctuated Muthanna's general stability with armed demonstrations and spasms of violence. The violence is either directed at those deemed enemies of the Sadr movement or of JAM, supplementing its continual low-grade intimidation, or it is a show of force against the government to make a political statement. An example of this latter scenario is the recent 30 November 2006 crisis in Samawa, where JAM attacked provincial government offices in order to boost its leverage in hostage negotiations over four of its captured militiamen.

¶3. (SBU) JAM's targeted violence and its acts of harassment and intimidation create deep resentment within the population, which wishes only to go about daily life. JAM's larger-scale clashes with the government brings the population's resentment to a boil. In these cases, the disruption of daily life is not localized, but widespread, and the people's displeasure forces the tribal sheikhs to intervene. The threat of tribal action against JAM hastens the agreement on some sort of truce, and the crisis subsides. The tribes act as guarantors of security and the status quo in Muthanna, limiting JAM's capacity to sustain major operations or escalate to the point of overthrowing the government.

¶4. (SEC/REL MNF-I) It is important to note, however, that while JAM is relatively weak in Muthanna compared to Dhi Qar or Basra) Australian military estimates place its hard-core membership at around 100, its active but auxiliary membership

at 300-500, and those it can mobilize for demonstrations at around 3,000) none of the principal players aligned against it in the government or in the security realm are willing to confront it head-on. The Governor, a former Badr Corps commander, does not bring the police or army units loyal to him (the Tactical Support Unit, the Criminal Intelligence Unit, etc.) to bear against JAM. Instead, he seeks to preserve outward calm at every turn. The tribes, as well, refuse to mount an attack against JAM unless their core interests are immediately at stake. There are two principal reasons for this. First, the security forces and the tribes all have JAM members, JAM sympathizers, and those willing to take JAM bribes among their ranks. Any serious confrontations would turn internecine and threaten to split these institutions. This problem is particularly severe within the police, with easily 50% of the service primarily loyal to JAM militia commanders. Second, and more fundamentally, as long as Iraq remains in a revolutionary political period in which the government cannot provide essential services, employment, and the rule of law, the appeal of radical politics and militancy will be strong, especially among the younger generations, and especially when such militancy earns one a healthy income.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

15. (C) Unemployment is rife in Muthanna. Current estimates of the provincial government place it at 65%. The agricultural sector, which in the past accounted for over 40% of the employment and over half of the economic activity in the province, has shrunk dramatically since the collapse of

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government support for it in the 1990s. Of the four SOEs in Muthanna, representing another 10-15% of the province,s job pool, one, a brick factory, has closed and three others (1 salt factory, 2 cement factories) are plagued by inefficiency and absenteeism. Lastly, the government,s provision of essential services is uneven. Electricity in Muthanna has reached its worst point since 2003 with currently 1 hour on, 6 hours off. The population centers in the province lack functional sanitation systems; sewage and refuse clog the streets. On the other hand, urban populations have access to drinking water, roads and bridges are mostly passable, and the education and health sectors are quite strong. Security is linked to economic performance, in that any fundamental attempt to weaken JAM (and other militia elements) hinges upon the government,s ability to fulfill the basic needs of its citizens.

KEY POLITICAL FIGURES

16. (C) Governor Muhammad Ali al-Hassani is the single most powerful individual in Muthanna. He was in the Badr Corp for two decades, rising to the rank of commander of the Middle Euphrates region in 2003. He then assumed the SCIRI mantle and entered into politics. He is the only governor in Iraq to have retained his post after the Dec. 2005 elections. Hassani,s network of support and patronage is extensive. With the aid of SCIRI,s control over the Ministry of Interior under Bayan Jabr, Hassani presided over the incorporation of Badr members into the elite units of the police services. Institutionally, he has the authority to direct the local brigade of the Iraqi Army. And he also relies on Albu Hassan tribesmen for armed support.

17. (C) Hassani has a clique within the Provincial Council that helps him control that body and exploit its budgeting and contracting processes for kickbacks. Members of this group include Mohammed al-Zayadi (Chairman of the Supervision Committee and arch political opportunist), Muhammad Arboud (notoriously corrupt Chairman of the PRDC), Ahmed Marzook

Salal (current PC Chairman), Qassim Hassan Auda (highly astute current Badr leader in Muthanna), Hadi Jabr Shirreab (PC member, engineer, and technical assistant to the Governor involved in project contracting and supervision), Jassim Shiraat, Fadhil Muhalhil, and Sheikh Abdullah Shanoon Dadhil (Chair of PC Security Committee, head of SCIRI in Muthanna, supported by Iran).

¶8. (C) Politically, the Shi,i parties dominate, but to a lesser degree than in the surrounding provinces. Muthanna politicians are opportunistic rather than ideological. By and large, they will affiliate with whomever controls the resources or the access they need at a particular point. As a party, SCIRI has the most coherence and delineation. The rest (Da,wa, Fadhila, Iraqi National Accord, Iraqi Communist Party, Middle Euphrates Party, Independent Islamic Organization, etc) lag far behind. The stronger parties seek to gain control over the various governmental departments in order to corner certain sectors and enhance their patronage networks.

¶9. (C) Underneath this political patchwork lies a web of tribal affiliations. In Muthanna, the latter ties are often more significant. Among the strongest tribes are the al-Zayad (Sheikh Raysaan Mutasher), the Albu Jayash (General Sheikh Ali al-Ajan Dali), the Albu Hassan (Sheikh Abdul Mansour and Sheikh Hakim Salman al-Sultan), the Bani Zraige (Sheikh Abdullah al-Hajj Kamaal al-Farhood), the al-Juwabir (Sheikh Azeez Rahem Sefar), and the al-Abbas (Sheikh Malik Hassan Abed).

¶10. (SEC/REL MNF-I) OMS and JAM are the major political forces not represented in the government. The principal OMS leaders in Muthanna are Sheikh Imad al-Shamari, Dr. Hamid Rasheed, Dr. Rasheed Alawi Sha,ie, and Ahmed Abdul Kadhum. They maintain direct contact with Muqtada al-Sadr. The top JAM leaders are Sheikh Ghazi Jihad al-Zagani (Samawa; has direct links to Muqtada but has operated without MAS,s approval in the past), Imad Raheem (Samawa; plays roles of Chief of Staff and Ops Officer), Kareem Qassim (Samawa BN commander), Hamza Chukhaya al-Zayadi (Samawa BN commander), Ahmed Saud Karbalaie (Samawa BN commander), Sheikh Nasser (Samawa BN commander), Sheikh Adnan Jalawi Hassani (JAM leader in Rumaytha), and Husayn Abd Zayd (JAM leader in

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al-Khidr).

¶11. (C) Hassani and the other main politicians in the government are out to enhance their own power. But their agenda is not a radical one. They want stability in the province and they are pragmatic. They are willing to work with us and we can cooperate with them. OMS and JAM, while they remain outside the political system, are too radical and too focused on political posturing to work with the coalition. If they were to enter the government in the next provincial elections, the realities and responsibilities of office might moderate their stance towards the PRT and Coalition Forces. But this remains to be seen.

COMMENT: POTENTIAL STEPS FORWARD

¶12. (C) Muthanna is currently stable, relatively secure, and has a reasonably effective provincial government. It is further along on these fronts than its neighboring provinces, and it has so far avoided the endemic instability, sectarian strife, and militia-driven lawlessness that beset Basrah, Maysan, Diyala, Anbar, and greater Baghdad. That said, JAM still poses a threat to provincial order and to the organs of government. Curbing that threat and undermining JAM,s popular support among the young should be our central objective. Any attempt to do so hinges upon the government,s ability to fulfill the basic needs of its citizens. Provincial institutions must prove themselves to

be the legitimate, effective alternatives to extra-legal militia control.

¶13. (C) Strategically, it is imperative that the Coalition reinforce the Muthanna government's success with further resources, development, and capacity-building so that the province remains a bulwark against spreading instability and an exemplar to the rest of Iraq of the benefits of effective government and the containment of violence. This can be done through programs in the areas of governance, rule of law, civil society building, essential services, and economic development. The goal of this entire effort must be to create the conditions under which the citizens of Muthanna support the provincial government and the ISF as viable alternatives to the extra-legal militias in the provision of justice, essential services, and basic administration

¶14. (C) Specific programs would include improving the provincial government's capacity to plan and execute its budget (it has spent 20% of its FY06 budget of \$40m); bringing power to the lowest levels of government and; making government accessible to civil society to grassroots through strengthening capacity of councils and mayors; improving interaction among various levels of government; and promoting transparency and access of key interest groups (including tribal leaders) to government. We must also undertake programs to improve the rule of law at the provincial level. We can help the provincial government improve its capacity to deliver basic services to the people through analytical and material assistance and focused Operations and Maintenance training. We should also help the provincial government set the conditions to reduce unemployment, and consequently militia enrollment and criminal activity, by stimulating the private sector and developing the local economy:

¶15. (C) We should also encourage the GOI to pass and implement legislation that enhances the ability of provincial governments to provide services and further promotes sustainable economic growth.

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